

Tourism Business Column

Camping our way

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As we head towards what will hopefully be a busy summer we need to continue the good progress that has been made this year on addressing social and environmental issues around freedom camping.

Getting a unified and effective response to managing freedom camping throughout New Zealand is a priority for our industry. If public tensions aren't addressed they have the potential to reflect badly on the whole visitor industry. TIA set up the Freedom Camping Forum in late 2007 to encourage this unified approach and ensure freedom campers respect the environment.

The forum's approach from the outset has been that New Zealand welcomes responsible freedom camping and favours a strong visitor education campaign over a heavy regulatory regime. However, last summer saw unprecedented community antagonism to freedom camping and we committed to taking even stronger action.

More action and a new approach

Our core message to freedom campers is now a much more direct 'Please stay in holiday parks, DOC camping grounds or other designated camping areas', and, 'If in doubt, assume nothing - always ask at an i-SITE, DOC visitor centre or holiday park'.

All the large campervan companies are now pushing this message and we are also communicating it through marketing websites and guide books.

TIA is meeting with community leaders and Regional Tourism Organisations, telling them what action is being taken nationally and how they can build on that locally. We can't make a difference out of Wellington alone – it's vital that regions across New Zealand step up to the challenge of making sure they have well thought through camping policies that are converted into accessible, visitor-friendly information.

Local Government New Zealand is working with its council members to establish a strong nationally consistent enforcement programme – while communities support the education approach they also think some enforcement ability is important.

Time to finish the job

Challenges do remain. An increasing number of freedom campers are buying vehicles privately, so we are working with the backpacker and youth hostels where much of this trading takes places, and with the Motor Trade Association.

It is also essential that community leaders don't allow the emotion surrounding this issue to create a hostile environment where some people feel it's OK to abuse freedom campers.

We are confident we are on track to creating an environment that allows Kiwis and international visitors to experience freedom camping safely without damaging the environment or upsetting communities.

We all need to keep the momentum going and finish the job.